

Parson of the hills Keyes, 71, in declining health

HICKORY — For most of his 71 years, the Rev. Charles Keyes has packed wagons, then cars and trucks, to bring Christmas to thousands of families in forgotten shacks deep in the Appalachian mountains.

Now declining health keeps Keyes inside most days.

"They say they miss me," Keyes told The Charlotte Observer Tuesday at his home in Hickory. "They want to see me, whether I take them stuff or not. I say, 'Pray for me,' for I'll be back."

Then, raising his voice, he declares: "I shall return!" Keyes will return to the mountains this weekend, rolled in on a wheelchair for an annual Christmas party. This year it'll be in Kentucky, near Pineville. They'll have gospel singing and packages of food for all. Keyes says he'll tell children the story of Christmas.

Dozens of volunteers worked Monday and Tuesday nights packing candy and oranges into 5,000 plastic bags that say: "From: Parson of the Hills. Jesus

Made it Possible." Above the words is a picture of a healthier Keyes with a well-groomed beard.

Keyes is known as "the Parson" or as Santa Claus, a visitor who carries loads of clothing and food over the mountains of West Virginia, Kentucky, Tennessee and the Carolinas.

Keyes began his ministry at age 7 by pulling a red wagon near his home in West Jefferson. His work has grown to a year-round operation, including a Christian summer camp in Hickory for 200 underprivileged children.

Keyes collects canned goods, fruit, shoes, overcoats, bicycles — anything he can donate to needy families.

This Christmas season, his volunteers set up tractor trailers in Charlotte and Greenville, S.C., to collect goods they'll carry north.

"I think the majority of people don't realize the poverty that's existing," Keyes said. "They think it's all right."

"Some kids don't have no Christmas. Without me, they'd have no Christ-

mas at all."

It was a lonely task at first.

As a child, Keyes carried snuff, tobacco and clothing to the mountain people of North Carolina, trudging through waist-deep snow, slipping on ice.

As a teenager, Keyes would pull his wagons by horse or mule. He carried candy and a Bible; the people he met nicknamed him Parson of the Hills.

Keyes said his parents and siblings never approved of his work.

For three years, he attended divinity school at Duke University to become a Methodist minister, but dropped out to return to the mountains.

As the years went on, Keyes traveled by van or truck. He greeted people in a black suit and tie, and gave sermons in pastures and school buildings.

People fed him soup and offered shelter. They publicized his visits by word of mouth and each year expected his return.

His efforts first slowed three years

ago, when Keyes suffered a series of strokes. Then, in 1987, he slipped on ice and broke his right hip.

Each year, his health gets worse. Now, Keyes' 37-year-old son David is doing most of the work.

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